The Lightning Serpent of Teotihuacan and the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent

La Serpiente Rayo de Teotihuacan y la Pirámide de la Serpiente Emplumada

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Abstract: In this article I sketch a portrait of a supernatural serpent that has received very little attention from the investigators of Teotihuacan: the Lightning Serpent. I present the different forms in which it appears and facets of its nature, establishing a link with the Rain God and the Feathered Serpent. I propose that the headdress on the Feathered Serpent's back in the Feathered Serpent pyramid in Teotihuacan (which has been interpreted in several different ways), is one of its most remarkable representations. If my proposal is correct, the meaning of the pyramid's iconography will have to be reconsidered. Finally, our examination of the images of the Lightning Serpent can enable us to recognise the members of the elite of Teotihuacan, who were associated with it.

Keywords: Iconography; Lightning Serpent; Feathered Serpent; elite; Teotihuacan; precolonial period.

Resumen: En este artículo bosquejo el retrato de una serpiente sobrenatural que apenas ha recibido atención por parte de los investigadores de Teotihuacan: la Serpiente Rayo. Presento sus diferentes formas de aparición y facetas de su naturaleza, establezco a la vez su vinculación con el Dios de la Lluvia y la Serpiente Emplumada. Propongo así, que el tocado ubicado sobre el dorso de la Serpiente Emplumada en la pirámide homónima en Teotihuacan (el cual ya ha recibido diferentes interpretaciones), corresponde a una de sus imágenes más notables. De ser correcta mi propuesta, habría que reevaluar el significado de la iconografía de dicha pirámide. Finalmente, a través del examen de las imágenes de la Serpiente Rayo, podemos arribar al reconocimiento de los miembros de la élite teotihuacana, quienes se habrían encontrado bajo su protección.

Palabras clave: iconografía; Serpiente Rayo; Serpiente Emplumada; élite; Teotihuacan; época precolonial.

The Lightning Serpent originally came to my notice as a collateral result of my efforts to decipher the iconography of the Butterfly Bird God of Teotihuacan. In the ball-game scenes in the Teotihuacan provincial style of Escuintla, Guatemala, the player with the characteristics of the Butterfly Bird God confronts a player with the attributes of a serpent; I interpreted this animal as a serpent associated with the Teotihuacan Rain God (Paulinyi 1995, 100-102; see also Paulinyi 2014, 44-45). Later, analysing Teotihuacan

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art, I discovered more images of the same serpent, in which it appears as a fiery supernatural being; it is still always linked to the Rain God, so I decided to give it the name of Lightning Serpent. These new images include the figures of the serpent with stepped-fret motifs in the murals of the Palace of the Sun, and the two-headed serpent in the murals of the Tlacuilapaxco residential compound at Teotihuacan (Paulinyi 1997). Today, with the accumulation of new evidence, I return to this subject with the object of studying the Lightning Serpent in depth, examining its iconography both in Teotihuacan and at other sites. My search for the serpent led finally to the zoomorphic headdress worn on the back of the Feathered Serpent in the Pyramid of the same name. This headdress has been interpreted in two different ways: as h, the primordial alligator of the Aztecs; or as an early version of Xiuhcoatl, the Aztec fire serpent. I propose that the headdress of the Feathered Serpent is none other than the Lightning Serpent.

The Lightning Serpent of the Palace of the Sun and analogous images

Figure 1. Representation of the Lightning Serpent decorated with stepped-frets, mural of the Palace of the Sun, Teotihuacan (Miller 1973, 76, fig. 102).

The starting point for our portrait of the Lightning Serpent are the murals of Room 1 of the Palace of the Sun, which represent one of the most remarkable images of a supernatural serpent in Teotihuacan (Miller 1973, figs. 102-103; a preliminary approach to this serpent is proposed in Paulinyi 1997). The murals show a serpent with its body coiled like a stepped-fret, and a crest with stepped-frets on its back (Figure 1). The serpent's head presents particular features: it has a short snout, the upper jaw curves sharply upward, the eye is formed of concentric circles, and an appendage grows backwards from it. The mouth is half-open, showing a row of pointed upper teeth, like a saw-blade. The body is contained within the borders by two narrow blue bands; it is divided into alternating red and yellow segments, separated by zigzag

lines like the stepped-fret. The row of stepped-fret on the serpent's back also alternate between red and yellow. The body ends in a tail with a rattlesnake´s rattle. The same Teotihuacan serpent – although some details differ – can also be seen on a Mayan ceramic (Figure 2). This serpent is raising its tail, like the serpent in the mural of the Palace of the Sun, also imitating the shape of a stepped-fret; a row of stepped-frets appears below the serpent. The body bears flames in the Teotihuacan style, a clear sign of its igneous nature. Its head is not identical to that of the serpent in the Palace, but its prominent nose is comparable to the curved upper jaw of the latter. We will see that the stepped upper jaw is also repeated in images of the Lightning Serpent, discussed below.

Figure 2. Representation of the Teotihuacan Lightning Serpent on a Mayan vessel with its body covered by flames (Kerr n.d., Kerr Number: 3622).

From this image, the fiery nature of the serpent of the Palace is evident. The flames on the serpent in Figure 2 are comparable to the colours of fire – red and yellow – on the serpent in the Palace of the Sun. We can understand its nature more easily if we observe some remarkable exponents of Teotihuacan iconography in the eastern parts of Mesoamerica. In Cerro Bernal Stela 3, on the coast of Chiapas, Mexico, the Teotihuacan Rain God appears carved on a stela with his most important insignia: A wavy object, probably a lightning staff (Pasztory 1988, 188-189; von Winning 1987, I, 68-70) and a vessel containing rain (Navarrete 1986, 4-14; García Des-Lauriers 2005, 2-3). The extraordinary thing is that beside the god we see the head of large serpent; its characteristics – short snout and recurved upper jaw – are similar to those of the serpent in the Palace of the Sun (Figure 3). Moreover, the Cerro Bernal serpent presents a stepped upper jaw, and flames emerge from its tongue, showing that it is a fire serpent linked to the Rain God. Above this serpent's head a fragment of motif can be observed, which also shows flames. García Des-Lauriers (2005, 2) mentions that both this serpent and others in a stela at La Morelia, Guatemala, likewise represented by flames and accompanying the Teotihuacan Rain God, could be metaphors for lightning. In my opinion, they are not metaphors but images of a serpent that for the people of Teotihuacan really existed: the Lightning Serpent. In the La Morelia stela we observe two vertical serpents with powerful heads, one on either side of the Rain God (Figure 4a). These two serpents are

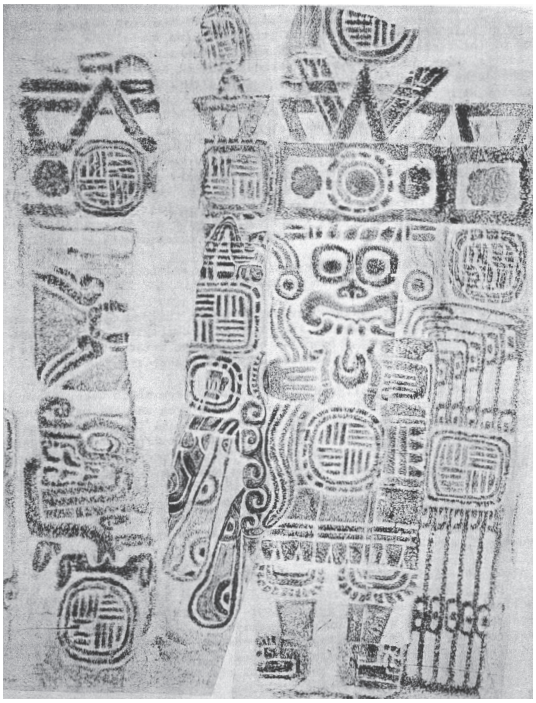

Figure 3. Cerro Bernal Stela 3 presenting the Rain God together with the Lightning Serpent surrounded by flames (Navarrete 1986, 10, fig. 5).

analogous with the wavy lightning staff of the god in Teotihuacan art, although the staff does not generally adopt the form of a serpent.[1] The Rain God wears a serpent headdress with recurved upper jaw, reminiscent of the curved jaw of the serpent on Cerro Bernal Stela 3 mentioned above (Figure 3). On this basis I propose that the headdress worn by the Rain God represents the Lightning Serpent.

There is a vessel from Teotihuacan bearing a representation similar to that of the La Morelia stela: The Rain God is holding a lightning staff in each hand, from which fire or light emerge; in visual terms, these staves correspond to the two serpents in flames on the stela (Figure 4b). A headdress, similar to the one depicted at La Morelia, can be seen on this deity's head; it consists of eyes – in this case feathered – and a triangular, recurved upper jaw with wavy horizontal lines representing the palate and fangs. A similar serpent headdress is also observed on a Teotihuacan figurine of the Rain God (Figure 4c). It seems probable that when this god appears exercising his fiery powers exclusively – with two lightning staves or two flaming serpents, instead of one staff and a vessel containing rain – he wears a headdress representing the Lightning Serpent. These three latter images give us the first indication of something that we will see more clearly later on: The Lightning Serpent, although it was an autonomous being, was also a manifestation of the Rain God.

All this is sufficient to establish that, apart from the Feathered Serpent, another supernatural serpent existed in Teotihuacan art, the Lightning Serpent; and that the serpent in the Palace of the Sun, like the other images cited, is one of its representations. What do its attributes tell us? We have seen that its body is divided into segments by stepped zigzags (see Figure 1). Elsewhere, on some 'Tlaloc' vessels, lightning appears in the form

1 See Séjourné (1966a, fig. 160); Pasztory (1988, fig. VI. 18); Cabrera Castro (2006a, plates 1-2); Juárez Osnaya and Ávila Rivera (2006, plates 13-15).

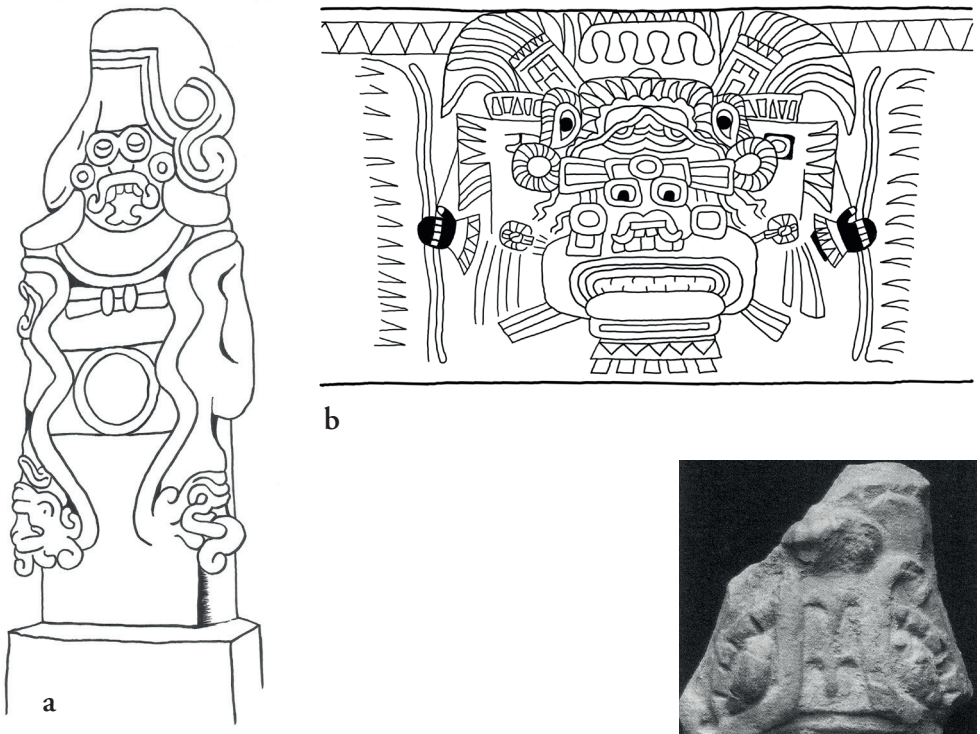

Figure 4. The Rain God with headdress representing the Lightning Serpent: (a) on a stela at Morelia (after Taube 1992a, fig. 20e, drawing by Tania Basterrica; (b) on a Teotihuacan vessel (after Séjourné 1959, fig. 162, drawing by Tania Basterrica); (c) on a Teotihuacan figurine (Scott 2001, fig. 140d. Courtesy of The National Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm).

of the same type of stepped zigzag that we see in the serpent in the Palace (Figure 5; Robb 2017, no. 49), occupying the place of the usual serpent-like lightning staff (as seen for example in Berrin and Pasztory 1993, no. 118; Robb 2017, no. 23, 50, 51). In a group of images that probably represent a storm, lightning takes the shape of stepped zigzags (Paulinyi 1997, fig. 4, 28-29). The zigzag and the wavy line clearly mean the same: lightning. The stepped upper jaw we saw earlier (Figures 2, 3a-b, and Figure 16 below) could be a simple representation of the stepped zigzag. Since the stepped zigzag also forms part of the stepped-fret, we may suppose that it has essentially the same meaning, i.e. lightning. The fact that the body of the Lightning Serpent in the Palace of the Sun presents the form of a stepped-fret is another argument in favour of its interpretation as lightning, as I propose here. Finally, it is striking that the colours of the serpent in the

Figure 5. Zigzag lightning on a 'Tlaloc' vessel (drawing by Tania Basterrica after Aveleyra Arroyo de Anda 1964, no page).

Palace of the Sun (red, yellow and blue) also support the identification of lightning, since the wavy lightning staff, held by the Rain God, often consists of parallel stripes of these three colours (see Cabrera Castro 2006a, plates 1-2; Juárez Osnaya and Ávila Rivera 2006, plates 13-15).

The two-headed Lightning Serpent

Continuing the search for images of the Lightning Serpent, a repeated representation of a two-headed serpent is observed in the upper part of a group of murals from the Tlacuilapaxco residential compound (C. Millon 1988);[2] In the lower part appear figures with a large zoomorphic headdress, making offering. Both the serpents and the figures making offerings are framed in a chevron chain motif, to use the term coined by Langley (1986, 242) (Figure 6). The heads of the Tlacuilapaxco serpent presents similar features to the head of the

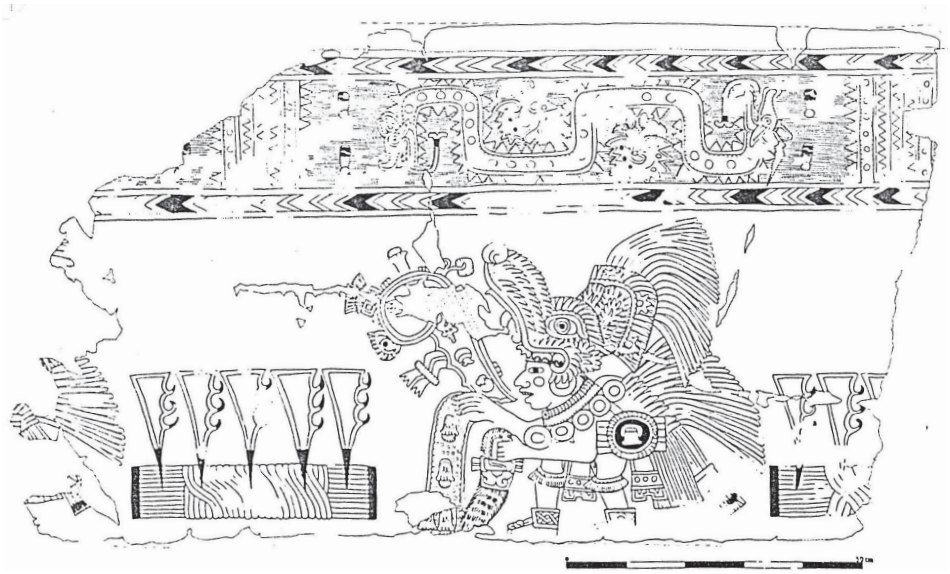

Figure 6. The two-headed Lightning Serpent with points on its body, upper strip of the mural in the Tlacuilapaxco residential compound, Teotihuacan (after C . Millon 1988, fig. VI.21. Drawing courtesy of Saburo Sugiyama).

2 For a preliminary approach to this serpent see Paulinyi (1997).

Lightning Serpent in the Palace of the Sun, i.e. recurved upper jaw, row of pointed teeth, round eye with appendage. Unlike the Palace serpent, the two-headed serpent has pointed ears. Between the undulations of this serpent's body, a two-headed bird is repeated. In other contexts, this bird is accompanied by stepped-frets (Séjourné 1966b, fig. 175), reinforcing the link between the two-headed serpent and the Palace of the Sun serpent (Paulinyi 1991, 58). The serpent's body is filled with a row of circles, and its outline is embellished with a row of triangular points. Flanking the serpent's body are vertical divisions that constitute abstractions of the body, and zigzags appear as independent motifs between the strips. The wings of the two-headed birds in the mural also have zigzag borders. The points around the serpent are red, alternating between dark and light tones; a similar alternation of two colours is observed in the segments of the body and in the stepped-frets of the Lightning Serpent in the Palace of the Sun, in that case red and yellow.

Figure 7. 'Tlaloc' vessel representing the Rain God with his wavy lightning staff and headdress with rows of circles, from La Laguna (Carballo 2012, fig. 6, detail. Courtesy of David M. Caballo).

The Tlacuilapaxco serpent presents other attributes which indicate its links with the Rain God. The row of circles on its body are reminiscent of 'Tlaloc' vessels from La Laguna, in which the god holds a wavy lightning staff marked with a row of circles; similar designs are visible on his headdress and clothing (Figure 7). Rows of circles are characteristic of the iconography of the Teotihuacan Rain God: in several of the most representative images of this god, the ribbons of his headdress bear similar circles (Miller 1973, fig. 360; R. Millon 1988, figs. IV.21a-c) (Figure 8). Turning to the points emerging from the serpent's body, we may

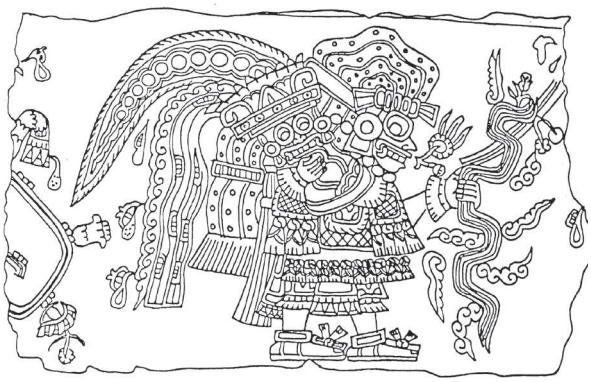

Figure 8. Teotihuacan mural representing the Rain God with rows of circles on the ribbons of his headdress (after Pasztory 1988b, fig. VI. 18. Drawing courtesy of Carolyn Dean).

mention that scattered black triangles, possibly of obsidian, appear on the enigmatic Teotihuacan "aspergillum" associated with the Rain God (Paulinyi 1991, 57-58). Furthermore, on another Teotihuacan vessel we see quincrosses combined with a net-like design, both linked with the Rain God, and the ribbons of the net are covered with rows of points in the same way as the body of the two-headed serpent (Séjourné 1966a, fig. 115).

It is plausible to imagine that these points – cutting and piercing – represent the destructive force of the Lightning Serpent, which would have had a martial connotation. It seems no mere coincidence that the representation of a segment of the two-headed serpent's body (strip with a row of circles and bordered by black points) appears in a shield of a figure dressed as a plumed jaguar in a mural in the Zacuala residential compound in Teotihuacan (Miller 1973, fig. 200) (Figure 9). Nor is it a coincidence that the Rain God, in one of his most emblematic representations, appears with a lightning staff, which in this case is explicitly a weapon, taking the form of a wavy spear with an obsidian point (Séjourné 1966b, fig. 160). In the Post Classic Period, Tlaloc, a descendent of the Teotihuacan Rain God represented in the Borgia Codex, hurls lightning bolts with sharp points to destroy a maize plant (Codex Borgia 1963, plate 20). The chevron chain motif from Tlacuilapaxco appears to support this martial connotation. Langley (1986, 62-67) proposed a relation between this motif and military symbolism, and within it Objects E and F, which frequently serve as military emblems adorning shields. It must be added that the chevron might represent the basic element of a zigzag line. In a previous work I proposed that Objects E and F were symbolic representations of a storm, and that the chevron chain design represented lightning (Paulinyi 2001, 21-22); if this proposal is correct, lightning and military power would be interwoven. The chevron chain is an important symbol from the point of view of my analysis, because – as we shall see – it repeatedly accompanies representations of the Lightning Serpent.

Figure 9. Feathered jaguar warrior holding a shield with image of a segment of the Lightning Serpent's body. Zacuala residential compound, Teotihuacan (after Pasztory 1988b, fig. VI. 19. Drawing courtesy of Saburo Sugiyama).

A further important detail is that at the two ends of the Tlacuilapaxco serpent we see four small motifs, consisting of a circle with an oval form placed vertically above it. At first glance this appears to be

the distal end of Teotihuacan throwing spear, but it lacks the final section. It might rather be a representation of a raindrop in the art of the Post Classic Period; although to date there is no such record in Teotihuacan art, nevertheless it appears in pre-Teotihuacan epochs, for example in the Olmec reliefs of Chalcatzingo, in the Morelos Valley, and in toponyms at Monte Alban II (Schaafsma and Taube 2006, 239). If these four motifs are indeed representations of raindrops, their appearance around the Lightning Serpent is understandable: lightning and rain are two faces of the storm.

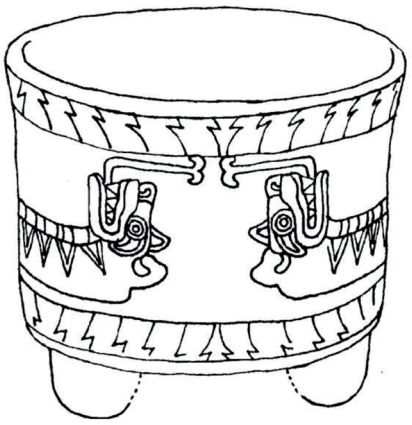

Figure 10. Teotihuacan vessel with representation of the two-headed Lightning Serpent with points on its body (after Berrin-Pasztory 1993, no. 142, drawing by the author).

The Tlacuilapaxco mural is not the only representation of the two-headed Lightning Serpent. It appears on a Teotihuacan tripod, with heavy, angular heads, and with similar features to the serpent in the Palace of the Sun and the two-headed serpent of Tlacuilapaxco: we observe the same type of eye with the same appendage, saw-like teeth and pointed ears, as well as a row of triangular points (Figure 10). Again, the serpent is framed above and below by a strip bearing zigzags. On another Teotihuacan vessel, the frontal head of the Rain God with his tasselled headdress (see Paulinyi 2001) is flanked by a two-headed serpent with heavy heads and stepped upper jaws, which again appears to be the two-headed Lightning Serpent (Figure 11). This identification is also supported by a Mayan figurine showing a complex scene on the upper part of a Mayan ceramic figurine (Taube 1992, fig. 17). Below is a litter (see

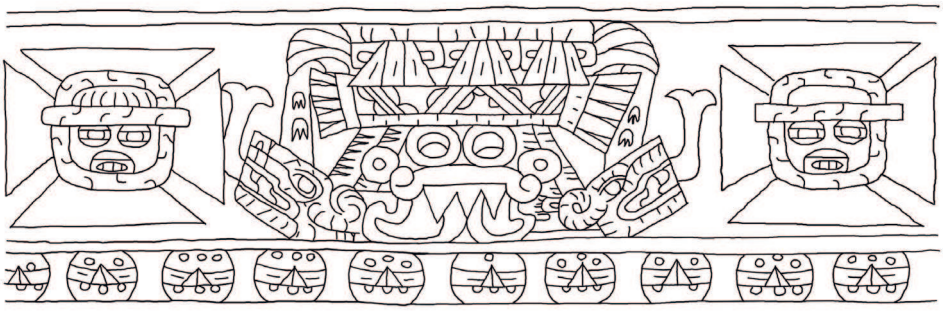

Figure 11. The Rain God flanked by the two-headed Lightning Serpent on a Teotihuacan ceramic vessel (drawing by Tania Basterrica after Séjourné 1959, fig. 127).

Halperin 2014, 56-62), occupied by a ruler, and on the roof of the litter we see the Teotihuacan Rain God peering out of a cave on a cloud-capped mountain, accompanied by the Mayan version of the two-headed Lightning Serpent.[3]

The obsidian serpent

Following the clue of the points outlining the Lightning Serpent, we find an image that appears to be a new representation of the same animal, but with a similar piercing element. Patio 2 of the Atetelco residential compound in Teotihuacan contains a central miniature temple surrounded by four platforms. The temple was covered with murals with representations consisting of images of the Feathered Serpent with the face of the Rain God, while the *tableros* of the four platforms present murals of other supernatural serpents, probably two on each *tablero* (Figure 12; Cabrera Castro 2006b, 216-234). The pilasters of the four porticoes are also covered with different versions of the same serpent. It has a straight body, heavy rectangular head, and feathers on its head, back and tail; however it does not present the series of rectangular bunches of feathers which normally cover the whole body of the Teotihuacan Feathered Serpent. Its principal attributes are the obsidian blades arranged in a row along its back, and an emblem consisting of large obsidian blades in the centre of the body. Furthermore, the *talud* below each panel contains a mural with a row of large obsidian blades. The chevron chain also reappears, this time in the *tablero* frames.

Although this serpent is not identical to the images of the Lightning Serpent shown previously, the obsidian blades are probably analogous with the points on the two-headed Lightning Serpent (compare Figure 12 with Figures 6, 9 and 10), and the chevron chain motif also establishes a link between them. Indeed, the points may also be of obsidian: in the shield in Figure 9, they are coloured black. We will shortly have a chance to see the

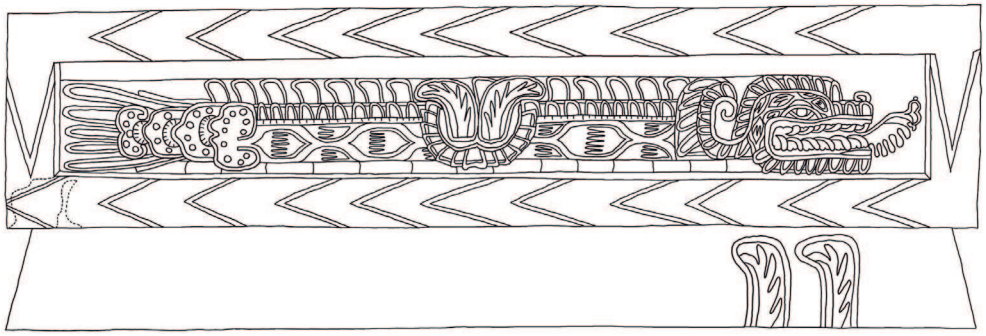

Figure 12. Representation of the obsidian serpent in a mural in the Atetelco residential compound, Teotihuacan (drawing by Tania Basterrica after Cabrera 2006b, fig. 18.12).

3 Taube's "War Serpent" (1992), see below.

headdresses of a group of lords linked with the Lightning Serpent in the murals of the Tepantitla residential compound (Miller 1973, figs. 171-183); these headdresses are also adorned with rows of obsidian blades. Furthermore, the Teotihuacan Lightning Serpent adopted by the Maya was identified by them with obsidian.[4] Finally, there is another possible representation of the Lightning Serpent on a ceramic fragment which shows a serpent's head with a short snout and no feathers; it has a particular eye, in front of which appears an emblem of three – or originally four – obsidian blades. On the upper edge of this fragment we again observe the chevron chain motif (Sugiyama 2005, fig. 22h).

The Lightning Serpent and the zigzag

The zigzag, in the different forms that we have observed (common zigzag, stepped zigzag, stepped-fret, chevron chain, and – possibly – upper jaw in the form of a simple stepped zigzag), is the most important attribute in images of the Lightning Serpent in Teotihuacan style, appearing in most of them. It shows us that these images, despite their differences, represent the same serpent, the essence of which is lightning. Furthermore, at the beginning of this article I identified the stepped zigzag as a symbol of lightning, and I will now present other images of the Lightning Serpent bearing this motif.

There is a Teotihuacan ceramic piece showing a serpent which itself follows the shape of a simple stepped zigzag (Figure 13a). Its body is also crossed by parallel and slightly curvilinear stepped zigzags. The stepped-fret shape and the zigzags crossing the body of the serpent in the Palace of the Sun are analogous with these features. The serpent on the ceramic piece

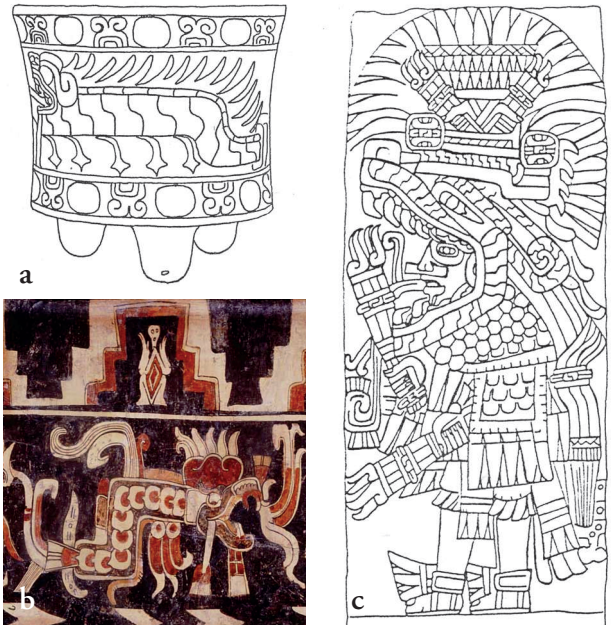

Figure 13. The Lightning Serpent with body in the form of a stepped zigzag and covered with the same motif: (a) on a Teotihuacan vessel (after Sánchez Montañés (1988, 11), drawing by the author; (b) on a Mayan vessel (Kerr n.d., Kerr Number: 4661); (c) on the headdress of the figure carved on a relief from Soyoltepec (Bolz-Augenstein and Disselhoff 1970, fig. 20).

4 See Taube's "War Serpent" (2002a, 301).

has a crest of feathers along its back, while from the lower edge of its body hangs a row of pointed motifs which bear some resemblance to the points and obsidian blades of other images of the Lightning Serpent (see Figures 6, 10, 12). The frame of the image contains alternating circles and rattlesnake´s rattles; the latter surely belong to the serpent represented on the vessel. It may be noted that Teotihuacan art contains sculptures in the shape of a rattlesnake's rattle (Parsons 1986, fig. 188; Teotihuacán 2009, figs. 155a-c; Robb 2017, no. 91).This image raises the question whether these sculptures are *pars pro toto* representations of the Lightning Serpent.

Another Teotihuacan serpent is represented on a Mayan vessel (Figure 13b). The animal's body consists of a simple stepped zigzag, as in the case of the previous serpent; from this we may infer that it also represents the Lightning Serpent. Flames or smoke appear to issue from its body – feathered only in parts – and the chevron chain motif appears on the lower edge of the image. The body is covered by a row of overlapping circular motifs, which we will find in the Tepantitla murals, in contexts of the iconography of the lords under the protection of the Lightning Serpent. Above the serpent on the Mayan vessel, framed in stepped motifs, are strange figures with romboidal bodies, a common fire symbol in Teotihuacan (von Winning 1987, I, 15-16).

Finally we must note a high-ranking personage in a relief from Soyoltepec, Veracruz, who wears a serpent dress possibly associated with the Lightning Serpent (Figure 13c). The serpent's long head differs from the Lightning Serpent's head that we have seen so far, however it is crossed by parallel and slightly curvilinear stepped zigzags like the Lightning Serpent (Figures 1, 13a). The serpent itself is also wearing a headdress, likewise decorated with zigzags, while its body hangs down behind its head, ending in a rattle. The personage depicted is holding two torches, each tied with a knot, and the serpent's headdress bears two identical torches tied with knots. The serpent's body is tied with a similar knot, as if it were also a torch, perhaps indicating its fiery nature. The personage has the characteristic eye-ring of the Rain God. This representation and other images which I discuss below reflect the close relationship between this god and the Lightning Serpent.

The presence of the Lightning Serpent in the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent

The meaning of the Feathered Serpent carved in the Pyramid of the same name, with a zoomorphic head on its back, is one of the great topics of debate in studies of Teotihuacan in particular, and Mesoamerica in general (Figure 14). The zoomorphic head itself wears a headdress, consisting of two geometric volumes – a trapezium with two rings, surmounted by a rectangle – and a large, horizontal knot. López Austin, López Luján and Sugiyama (1991, 41) observed that this headdress is similar to the manta symbolic complex, which is thought to have a calendar-related meaning (Langley 1986, 153-167). Two competing proposals have been maintained over recent decades for the interpretation of the Feathered Serpent in conjunction with the zoomorphic headdress

mentioned above; both interpretations propose a late analogy as their starting point. López Austin, López Luján and Sugiyama (1991) maintain that the Teotihuacan Feathered Serpent is identical with the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, a being that would part of the hard core of the Mesoamerican religious tradition which changed very slowly or not at all over the centuries. These authors accepted the observation of Sugiyama (1989), who suggested that the zoomorphic head on the serpent's body is a headdress;[5] following Drucker (1974, 13) they say that the headdress represents the head of Cipactli, the primordial alligator of the Aztec creation myth. They think that the scaly surface of the headdress is the alligator's skin. Based on these two identifications – Cipactli and Quetzalcoatl – and developing an erudite argument, López Austin, López Luján and Sugiyama (1991) come to the conclusion that the meaning of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent is Time, created by Quetzalcoatl. Later, Sugiyama (2005, 2017) proposed that the mentioned headdress would have represented a powerful ruler's ascension to power.

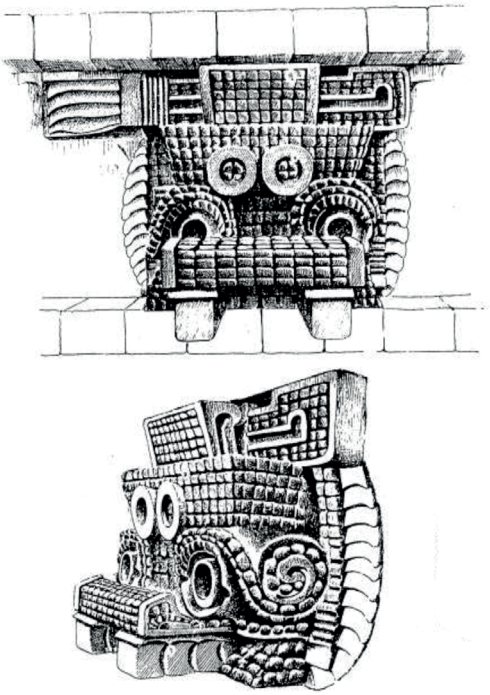

Figure 14. Two views of the Lightning Serpent headdress on the back of the Feathered Serpent of the Pyramid of the same name (after Caso and Bernal 1952, fig. 184, detail).

Taube, on the other hand, identified the existence of a supernatural serpent, and a headdress by which it is represented, in different parts of Mesoamerica and first of all in the images of the Mayan rulers. He calls it the "War Serpent," on account of the martial character of the images, and proposes that it originated in Teotihuacan. Furthermore, he states that the headdress borne on the back of the Feathered Serpent of the pyramid is none other than the headdress representing this "War Serpent" (Taube 1992). This author accepted the idea proposed previously by Caso and Bernal (1952, 113-114), according to which the headdress worn by the Feathered Serpent on its back would be comparable with Xiuhcoatl, the fire serpent of the Post Classic; he noted that in Mayan art, the figure of "War Serpent" appears associated with a fiery nature. He also argues that

5 The same conclusion is reached by Taube (1992), the author of the parallel proposal.

the rough surface of the headdress or helmet must be because it is composed of many small platelets. For the iconography of the Pyramid, Taube proposes a duality between the Feathered Serpent of fertility and the "War Serpent" of fire. He subsequently broadened his proposal, trying to demonstrate more similarities between the "War Serpent" and the Postclassic Xiuhcoatl (Taube 2002b, 270-301), and trying to include among the images of the "War Serpent" a series of Teotihuacan representations of supernatural jaguars (Taube 2012, 117-124).

In contrast to these two interpretations, I propose that the headdress worn by the Feathered Serpent represents the head of the Lightning Serpent. As in other images of the Lightning Serpent analysed above, the head represented by the headdress is heavy, with a short snout and recurved upper jaw (see Figures 1, 3a-b, 6, and Figure 16 below; and headdresses in Figures 4a-c). It has a row of teeth reminiscent of both the Lightning Serpent in the Palace of the Sun (Figure 1), and the two-headed serpents of Tlacuilapaxco (Figure 6) and Figure 10. There is another feature of the head which also suggests a snake rather than an alligator: it has a spiral adornment behind the eye, a characteristic feature in Teotihuacan representations of snakes. As we have seen, multiple images of the Lightning Serpent have such a spiral. Furthermore, in the profile of the upper jaw we see a small semi-circle of feathers, which also sometimes appears in representations of serpents (von Winning 1987, I, ch.. X, figs. 2a, c, e, f, g). In contrast to the opinion of López Austin, López Luján and Sugiyama, I consider that the fact that the head depicted in the headdress does not have a lower jaw is not a solid argument that it represents an animal with no mandible – such as an alligator – since the jaguar, for example, despite its powerful mandible, frequently lacks a jaw in the headdresses in which it is represented (see Séjourné 1962, fig. 130; Berrin and Pasztory 1993, no. 138; Cabrera Castro 2006c, plates 1-4). Finally, it must be noted that there is scarcely any comparative basis in Teotihuacan art to justify identification of this zoomorphic headdress as Cipactli: the heads of the only alligators painted in the "Mythological Animals" mural bear little resemblance to the zoomorphic headdress discussed here (as remarked also by Taube 2002b, note 2). In short, I consider that the proposal that this headdress could represent Cipactli is not supported by any plausible arguments.

It cannot be accepted that the Teotihuacan Feathered Serpent is identical with the Aztec Quetzalcoatl without tangible, positive arguments. With specific reference to the Feathered Serpent of the Pyramid of the same name, the need is yet greater to present evidence that the Teotihuacan Feathered Serpent is a god of creation, and especially the creator of time. No such argument has been presented to date. What we observe in the images at Teotihuacan is a Feathered Serpent that brings the rain (see also Taube 2002a, 38). Below I will discuss more precisely the relationship between the Feathered Serpent and the Rain God.

Turning to Taube's proposal, mentioned above, I consider it posible that the headdress on the back of the Feathered Serpent and a large assembly of serpent headdresses

recorded beyond the borders of Teotihuacan all represent the same supernatural serpent. Nevertheless, the only argument advanced by Caso and Bernal (1952, 113-115) to identify this headdress as an image of Xiuhcoatl is that they both have a recurved upper jaw. On the contrary, if we look for analogies for said headdress, we must do it within Teotihuacan art, finding it in the form of the Lightning Serpent, whose images were unknown by the two authors mentioned. If my proposal is correct, and this headdress does in fact represent the Lightning Serpent, then the "War Serpent" identified by Taube in pieces recorded outside Teotihuacan would also be an adoption of the Teotihuacan Lightning Serpent rather than an early Xiuhcoatl.

The triad of the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent

In this pyramid we probably see the triad consisting of the Rain God, the Feathered Serpent and the Lightning Serpent. The Lightning Serpent and the Feathered Serpent are both intimately related with the Rain God. Even if the Lightning Serpent is a fiery animal (Figures 1-2, 3a-b, 4a-b, 13b), it is also associated with rain: it appears with the Rain God (Figures 3, b, 4a, 11a), presents links with Rain God iconography (Figures 6, 7, 8), and the Rain God wears a headdress representing the Lightning Serpent (Figures 4a, b, 4c). From the wavy lightning staff of the Teotihuacan Rain God – which is a replica of the Lightning

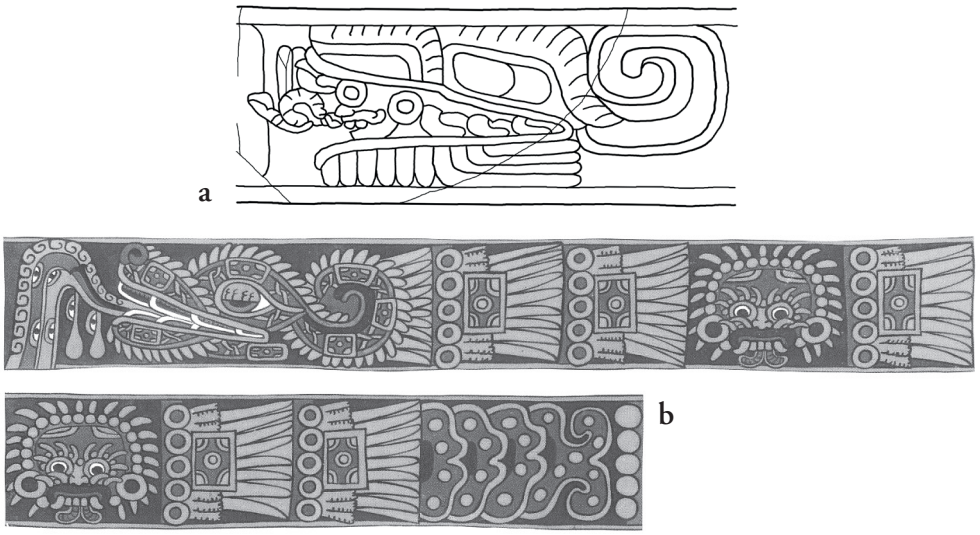

Figure 15. Fusion images of the Rain God and the Feathered Serpent: (a) head of the Rain God emerging from the mouth of the Feathered Serpent, ceramic fragment from Teotihuacan (drawing by Tania Basterrica after Séjourné 1966b, 211, fig. 195); (b) frontal face of the Rain God incorporated into the body of the Feathered Serpent. Mural from the Atetelco residential compound, Teotihuacan (after Miller 1973, 165, fig. 349, detail).

Serpent – issue both clouds and flame (Figure 8). On the other hand, on a ceramic fragment from Teotihuacan, we also observe the head of the Rain God emerging from inside the mouth of the other serpent: the Feathered Serpent (Figure 15a). Elsewhere, the frontal face of the god appears fused with the body of the same serpent bearing net-like designs in a group of murals in the Painted Patio of Atetelco, Teotihuacan (Figure 15b) (Miller 1973, Fig. 346). The close link between the Rain God and the Feathered Serpent is also manifested on a vessel found in Tlailotlacan, Teotihuacan, in which the serpent bears no less than three Rain God emblems (Ortega 2014, 267).

While the Feathered Serpent and the Lightning Serpent headdress worn by the Feathered Serpent cover the exterior of the Pyramid, the fragments that have been preserved of the reliefs from the sanctuary on the peak of the pyramid present motifs from the iconography of the Rain God (Sugiyama 2005, 76-82). It would not be surprising to find that the pyramid was devoted to the cult of this god (see Sugiyama 2005, 86) or a version of this god, associated with two serpentine manifestations. The Pyramid would not be the only case of this triad appearing together; we have seen them in the Painted Patio of Atetelco (Figure 12), where the murals of the central altar were painted with heads of the Rain God joined to bodies of the Feathered Serpent, while images that probably show the Lightning Serpent appear on the platforms at the four sides of the patio.

Support my proposal about the presence of the God of Rain in the Pyramid the fact that images of the Rain God and motifs of his iconography are frequent among the minor objects from the residential building to the north of the pyramid (see Jarquín Pacheco 2002, figs. 72, 80, 82a, 173, 182, 204, 230, 250, 298-300, 324, 350, 357, 390), while no representations of the two serpents have been recorded. The results of the extensive excavations in the tunnel of the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent – which according to the excavators was a replica of underworld of the Rain God (Gómez Chávez 2017) – agree with my idea. Among other objects, more than 20,000 fragments of ten different basic types of 'Tlaloc' vessels were found, which were used in the cult of Rain God in Teotihuacan. It should also be mentioned that both at the top of the Pyramid and in its central grave (no. 14) various 'Tlaloc' vessels were also found (Sugiyama 2005, 180-182).

To whom could the Lightning Serpent headdress worn by the Feathered Serpent belong? One possibility is the Rain God himself, whom we have seen wearing the Lightning Serpent headdress in various images (see Figures 4a, b, c). However, if we consider the nose ornament with fangs placed below the headdress on the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent (see the frontal image in Figure 14), the idea of a mortal wearer appears more probable. Based on the relative locations of the headdress and the nose ornament, they belong together: whoever wore the headdress, wore the nose ornament also. In this case we must exclude the Rain God as the possible wearer of the headdress, because he never appears with a nose ornament in Teotihuacan art; however his mortal representative could do so. Various high-ranking figures used a nose ornament with

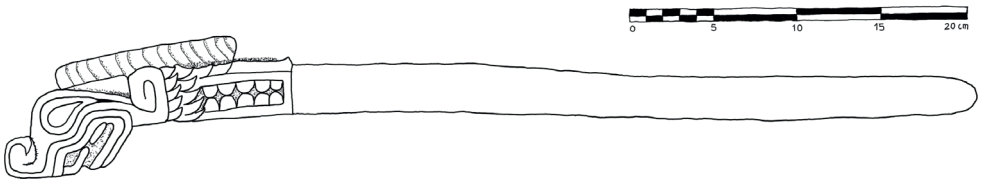

Figure 16. Staff of office surmounted by the head of the Lightning Serpent, found inside the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent (drawing by Tania Basterrica after Cabrera Castro 1993, fig. 4).

fangs, some of whom were linked with the Rain God – although they did not wear the headdress of the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent (Séjourné 1966b, fig. 62; Hellmuth 1975, fig. 3a-d; Berrin and Pasztory 1993, no. 140). So we must look among the lords and the rulers linked to the Rain God and to the Lightning Serpent, the most likely candidates for wearers of the headdress. These lords and their divine protectors were probably connected with war, because the massive foundational human sacrifice of the pyramid consisted largely of warriors or people dressed as warriors (Sugiyama 2005). Above, we mentioned the martial aspect of the Lightning Serpent in the context of the Tlacuilapaxco murals (Figure 6).

As a possible third insignia of those lords who wore the Lightning Serpent headdress, we must mention the snake-headed wooden staff of office found inside the plundered Tomb 13 in the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent (Figure 16). Although this object has been considered to be the representation of the Feathered Serpent (Cabrera Castro 1993, 104-105; Sugiyama 2005, 182-184; Teotihuacán 2009, no. 27; Robb 2017, no. 58), its characteristics speak against this assumption. The upper jaw is stepped and strongly recurved, which as we have seen characterises the Lightning Serpent rather than the Feathered Serpent, as does the eye with an appendage (for the latter see Figures 1, 6, and 10). The serpent's head on the staff has a crest of feathers, and other feathers lower down, but they do not cover the head; in representations of the Feathered Serpent the head is covered by feathers but there is no crest. This staff has been well compared with the staff of office in the form of a snake of a ruler of Piedras Negras on Stela 26, in the Mayan zone (Sugiyama 2005, 183). We should note that, in that case, the headdress of the ruler represents precisely the Mayan version of the Teotihuacan Lightning Serpent, indicating that the headdress and the staff belong together. All things considered, therefore, we can propose that the Lightning Serpent headdress, the staff of office in the form of the Lightning Serpent, and the nose ornament with fangs, together formed a set of insignia.

Epilogue: the Lords with Lighting Serpent headdress

This concludes my portrait of the Lightning Serpent. However, a final, connected question arises: can representations of the lords with the Lightning Serpent's headdress be identified in Teotihuacan art? The answer is yes: according to my analysis, they are most probably the figures depicted in the murals of Tlacuilapaxco and Tepantitla. In the Tlacuilapaxco murals, the figures making offerings file past below the two-headed Lightning Serpent (Figure 6), which already suggests the probability of a link between them. This idea is supported by the fact that the headdresses of these lords (representing a zoomorphic head) are similar to the headdress worn by the Rain God when he holds two staves or lightning serpents to display his fiery side (Figures 4a, b; see also 4c). As we have already seen, this type of headdress represents the Lightning Serpent.

The headdress at Tlacuilapaxco is not a faithful copy of the head of the Lightning Serpent as it appears in Teotihuacan art, but a reinterpretation based on its essential characteristics. On the one hand it has a recurved upper jaw, which as we have seen is a recurrent, formal feature of the Lightning Serpent (Figures 1, 3a-b, 6, 14, 18). On the other, the zoomorphic head of the headdress has ears, just like the two-headed Lightning Serpent visible above the figures making offerings, and the other two-headed serpent shown above (Figure 10). The presence of ears and the appearance of teeth similar to those of a mammal predator (with possible features of a coyote, wolf or jaguar) in the headdress from Tlacuilapaxco are inter-related.[6] Each of the individuals making offerings is associated with a bundle of sticks, into which are stuck four or five agave leaves; this may suggest self-sacrifice. The bundle may indicate that the offering is made during the Teotihuacan New Fire ceremony, since a representation on a ceramic fragment shows the bundle in flames accompanied by agave leaves (Rattray 2001, 149a).

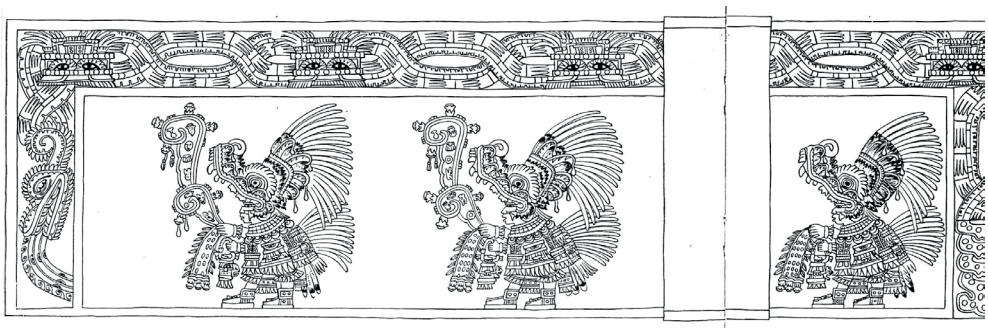

Figure 17. Tepantitla mural with representation of lords with Lightning Serpent headdress; framed by the Feathered Serpent wearing headdresses superimposed on its body (Miller 1973, 100-101, fig. 173).

6 Indeed Latsanopoulos (2002, 16-17) proposed that the headdress represented the head of a coyote or a wolf.

In Tepantitla there are murals representing lords making offerings with headdresses similar to those in Tlacuilapaxco, with the difference that in the Tepantitla headdresses two rows of obsidian blades can be seen, from which hang drops of water (Figure 17). These rows of obsidian blades are similar to the row observed in the figure of the Lightning Serpent of Atetelco (see Figure 12), and also evoke the points of the two-headed serpent of Tlacuilapaxco (see Figure 6). Another particular feature of the robes of these lords consists of two vertical rows of small, over-lapping discs. A similar row is observed on the body of the Lightning Serpent in Figure 13b. It seems to me that the particular positioning of the discs is comparable with the layers of a rattlesnake's rattle.

The frame of the Tepantitla murals is occupied by representations of the Feathered Serpent, consisting of two interwoven bodies surmounted by identical headdresses superimposed on alternate sections (Figure 18a). On a Teotihuacan mirror from Copán, from the tomb of a queen from the 5th century AD, a figure is depicted surrounded by two feathered serpents, and with a headdress similar to those from Tlacuilapaxco and Tepantitla (Nielsen 2006, fig. 6). The lower segment of the Tepantitla headdresses located in the frame of the mural consists of a pair of horizontal strips above and below two feathered eyes, apparently representing the whole head (see Figure 17). The upper segment consists of a trapezium with a superimposed rectangle, and two bunches of feathers at the sides. The eyes are identical to those of the headdresses of the lords making offerings in the mural of the two-headed Lightning Serpent at Tlacuilapaxco (see Figure 6). The headdress in the frame of the Tepantitla mural presents rows of circles, which, as remarked above, characterise images of the Rain God (Figures 7, 8) and related iconographic contexts. The closest analogy is the row observed on the body of the two-headed Lightning Serpent of Tlacuilapaxco (see Figure 6). In a mural of the Zacuala residential compound at

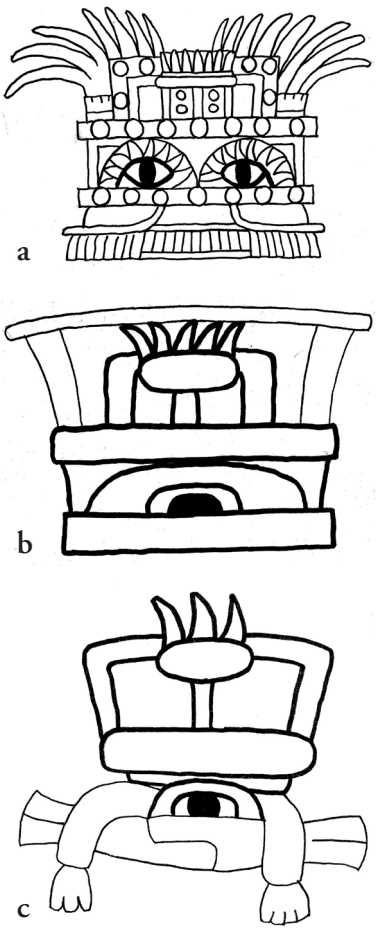

Figure 18. Headdress worn by the Feathered Serpent in the Tepantitla mural and variations represented on the pectorals and ritual bags of the figures making offerings in the same mural: (a) headdress; (b) pectoral (detail, inverted); (c) ritual bag (detail, inverted) (after Miller 1973, figs. 176-177, drawing by Tania Basterrica).

Teotihuacan, the headdress on the back of the Feathered Serpent is seen to have the same basic structure described previously, although without the two eyes (Séjourné 1959, fig. 10). In the upper segment, instead of the trapezium, there is a broad rectangular frame with an elongated rectangular element superimposed in a vertical position; while the lower segment containes a framed horizontal panel with a round, feathered motif in the centre. Again, most of these elements are covered by circles in rows.

In the Tepantitla murals, a close link can be established between the paraphernalia of the lords with the Lightning Serpent headdresses and the headdress worn on the back of the Feathered Serpent. The lords are seen to be wearing a pectoral with a miniature version of the headdress, inverted. The pectoral shows each of the elements of the headdress, but with only one eye; this is unfeathered and similar to the eye on the headdress worn by the lords (Figure 18b). Furthermore, the headdress worn by the Feathered Serpent also appears in miniature on the ritual bag held by the figures making offerings on the Tepantitla mural, and perhaps also on the end of the ribbon falling down their back, in other words abbreviated representations of their headdress appear on their equipment (Figure 18c). Thus the lords in the Tepantitla mural self-identify with the headdress worn by the Feathered Serpent.

Does the headdress worn on the back of the Feathered Serpent of Tepantitla represent the head of the Lightning Serpent? A comparison with the headdress of the Lightning Serpent that we observed in the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent (Figure 14) shows that this is the case: the Tepantitla headdress is an abstract version. It bears the trapezium motif and the elongated rectangle, which are repeated on the headdress of the Lightning Serpent in the Pyramid. In the lower segment of the Tepantitla headdress we saw two feathered eyes replacing the head of the Lightning Serpent, which appears in complete form in the same location on the lower part of the of the headdress of the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent. That these two eyes and the eye on the headdress of Tlacuilapaxco representing the head of the Lightning Serpent are identical is consistent with my proposal. The context is the same in each case: the Feathered Serpent wears the headdress on its body.

Figure 19. Lord with Lighting Serpent headdress sitting on a throne (Teotihuacan room of the Mexican Museo Nacional de Antropología, photograph by Zoltán Paulinyi).

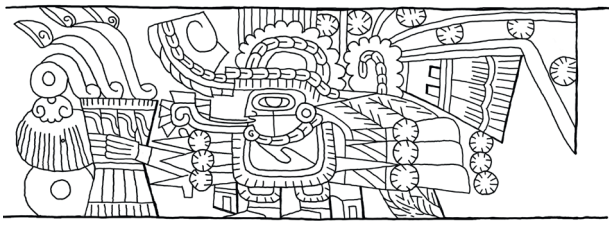

Figure 20. Lord with Lighting Serpent headdress, created in small segments, carries throwing spears with a shield and a bundle of burning sticks (drawing by Tania Basterrica after Séjourné 1964, fig. 8).

Finally I present images of lords with Lightning Serpent headdress that appear on minor objects, and that for the most part have previously been interpreted as representations of lords associated with the Feathered Serpent (see Sugiyama 2005, figs. 20-21, 62). The Lightning Serpent headdress can be worn by busts of these lords: one such is making an offering in front of a cave accompanied by a bird (von Winning 1969, 180), another, placed on a base adorned with skulls, appears to be a mortuory bundle (Teotihuacán 2009, no. 62). There are also two differentes types of figurines: one standing (Scott 2001, plate 86a), the other sitting on a throne (Figure 19). We sometimes see the headdress on the head of armed lords, or forming part of a set of objects symbolising war. On one occasion, a frontal Lightning Serpent headdress is observed on a bundle of spears before a figure with two rings on his forehead; the upper jaw is sharply recurved. Another wearer of our headdress, created in small segments, carries a handful of throwing spears with a shield and a bundle of burning sticks (Figure 20; Sugiyama 1992, fig. 14), as we have already seen in the Tlacuilapaxco murals. Elsewhere the same headdress, again in frontal position, appears on the head of another figure who has the Rain God's eye-rings (Séjourné 1959, fig. 131A). The headdress also appears without a human figure, supported on the two rings and a bundle of throwing spears (Séjourné 1966a, fig. 94). The eye of the headdress has an appendage similar to that observed in several images of the Lightning Serpent. The repetition of the eye rings on the faces of these figures demonstrates that they are also related with the Rain God. This last group of images underlines a feature of our story of the Lightning Serpent and his lords, mentioned above: their link with war.

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